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Of Terrors and Transformations: Studying the Condition of (Post) Humanity amidst the Fusion of Lovecraftian Monstrosity and Techno-Body Horror in Neal Asher's *Transformation Trilogy* and *Lockdown Tales*

Dr. Indrajit Patra

Independent Researcher, Ex Research Scholar, NIT Durgapur

ABSTRACT:

The present study aims to take a closer look at the various ways in which the British science fiction writer Neal Asher's Transformation Trilogy (2015–17) and Lockdown Tales (2020) describe monstrosity and horror to depict the resultant loss of humanity in the wake of radically transformative physiological and mental changes. For the study, the author shows how Asher's works weld together certain elements of Lovecraftian monstrosity with the profuse depiction of category-violating body horror. The narratives feature both human and nonhuman protagonists undergoing a series of paradigm-shifting biotechnological, computational, and mental augmentations, all of which seem to question the possibility of retaining even the facsimile of humanity in a mind-bogglingly advanced, incredibly exotic, and exceedingly post-human universe. While both biotechnological and Lovecraftian modes of horror seem to rely on the portrayal of the insignificance of humans in the face of a boundless, indifferent, and often evil cosmos, the question of how much humanity humans can ultimately salvage from the tentacles of monstrous transformation remains highly relevant throughout Asher's works. The article also shows how such changes pave the way for the "other" within oneself and the grotesque "Other" to assume center stage.

Keywords: *Post-humanism; Monstrosity; Grotesquery; Body Horror; Lovecraftian Horror; Transformation*

Introduction

"When the transformation does start to happen," it "can't be prevented," writes Asher in his 2002 novel *The Skinner* (360) (Asher, 2002)

The novels in the *Transformation* series, namely *Dark Intelligence* (2015), *War Factory (*2016), and *Infinity Engine* (2017), as well as the six short stories in *Lockdown Tales* (2020), are all part of the fictional Polity universe, which is a post-scarcity, techno-utopian, post-human galaxy-wide empire. Asher's *Transformation Trilogy* specifically focuses on the actions of such characters as the resurrected human Thorvald Spear; the augmented human Isobel Satomi; the grotesque alien prador Sverl, who undergoes an even more grotesque transformation; and the godlike, insane, and rogue machine intelligence such as Penny Royal and its nemesis Brockle. *Lockdown Tales* features six stories, each the length of a novella, and prominent human characters such as Cheever and Rune in "The Relict," who try "to maintain the facsimile of something approaching the humanity of this world" ("The Relict," in *Lockdown Tales*, 2020); an unaugmented, lone human survivor named Ben in "Plenty," who finds and repairs a damaged cyborg that is seemingly "a sad combination of human facsimile and the truth of exposed and broken machine" ("Plenty," in *Lockdown Tales*, 208); a highly mutated Old Captain struggling to keep his humanity intact in "Bad Boy"; the highly curious Jonas Clyde in "Raising Moloch"; and a grotesquely transformed surgeon named Dr. Whip, who mourns the loss of his humanity at the hands of the rogue AI Penny Royal in "Dr. Whip," to name a few. Science fiction critic Russell Letson comments, quite fittingly, that "the possibility of monstrous transformation lurks everywhere in Asher's universe" ("Lockdown Tales by Neal Asher," *Locus*) (Lockdown Tales, 2020). Asher's novels are all full of planet-destroying battles, sentient and cynical war-drones, massive dreadnaughts, wormholes, hyperspace, indestructible post-humans, and severely mutated aliens battling their hearts out in several large-scale and close-up combats that seem to decide the fate of not only the galaxy but of the entire universe. In an interview (2015) given to *SFFWorld*, Asher states, "I enjoyed building new universes"; however, his works also include a more subtle undercurrent of psychological tension where his human/post-human protagonists seem to be trapped in an inner battle against the overwhelming onslaughts of the monstrosity and grotesque transformations that seek to erode and alter humanity beyond recognition (Macmillan, 2015). Despite the portrayal of godlike AIs that are always busy in search of newer and more devious ways to achieve their twisted aims and hidden agendas, grotesque aliens trying to cope with their newly enacted transformations, paradigm-shifting creatures capable of time traveling and manipulation of hyperspace, and the depiction of grotesque and gruesome violence, it is the recognizably humane point of views of Thorvald Spear and Isobel Satomi that infuse the works with human interest. In these books, before the blind, inhuman, and pitiless indifference of the cosmos, the unaugmented humans are rendered not only insignificant but almost nonexistent; even the most ordinary humans are enhanced with certain physiological and computational augmentations to live up to the challenges of their post-human culture. In fact, throughout the entire Polity universe, which comprises of as many as four series or trilogies, namely the *Agent Cormac* series (comprising five books), the *Spatterjay* trilogy*, Transformation Trilogy,* and *Rise of the Jain* trilogy, it is evident how against a posthumanist, post singular backdrop, the transformation motif

plays a crucial role in shaping the evolution of sprawling and expansive narratives where humanity has receded into the background but is not yet lost. Besides describing purely physical transformation or augmentation through bionanotechnological means, reinventions, or alien viral infections, several closely associated ideas such as enslavement, subversion, and even enlightenment have also been explored from different interesting perspectives throughout these 18 novels, and the *Transformation* series and *Lockdown Tales* are no exception. With their primary desire to save humanity from an impending doom, posthuman beings, alien monstrosities, and rogue bots collide on the scene. Asher's brilliance lies in combining the two powerful horror subgenres, namely the Lovecraftian tradition and body horror, with post-human grotesquery and melodrama, masterfully crafted space-operatics, and an expansive galactic-historical background.

Lovecraftian Horror seems to explore the finite capacity of human minds when it is tasked with comprehending the forces of cosmicism and monstrosity and depict the consequences that befall the human senses when they venture close to the "terrifying vistas of reality" (Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*, 61), or seek to understand the "cosmic blackness" (Callaghan, *H. P. Lovecraft's Dark Arcadia*, 9). Cosmic Horror seems to remind us once and for all that "the world is not necessarily the way our present empirical valley happens to be" (Suvin, "Estrangement and Cognition," 1.2, *Strange Horizons*). Following Cohen's sevenfold classification, it may be argued that monsters such as Penny Royal and Brockle, who are the incarnation of "Cosmic Horror," seem to function from their "position at the limits of knowing" and thus also warn others "against exploration of its uncertain demesnes" (Cohen, "Monster Culture [Seven Theses]," 12).

Techno-bio-horror, on the other hand, aims to portray the horrors that emerge from the violent, grotesque transformations of human beings as a result of some of the most extreme techno-scientific enhancements or modifications of the body and mind. As Bruce Clarke in his *Posthuman Metamorphosis* aptly remarks, "Narratives of bodily metamorphosis depict in various figures the restless transformations of the human" (*Posthuman Metamorphosis,* 1), and this is what also unfolds in Asher's *Transformation* universe. Borrowing Clarke's words, it may be further stated that the study aims to show how Asher's "post-human figures of systemic hybridity" embody the consequences of transgressive couplings where the subject is almost invariably transformed "into something beyond the human". In Alan Moore's graphic novel *Swamp Thing* (1984–1987), the protagonist, Alec, emerges as a humanoid-vegetal hybrid whose humanity is overwhelmed with the avatar of a "plant-monster, a human, or a human-plant hybrid," the very nature of which problematizes humankind's attempt to construct identities based on "ontological distinctions and visual taxonomies" (McDonald and Vena, "Monstrous Relationalities").

In addition, science fiction has a rich tradition of depicting the possibilities and perils of human/nonhuman/trans/post-human transformations. *Dr. Heidenhoff's Process* (1880) by Edward Bellamy, Robert Louis Stevenson's masterpiece *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and H. G. Wells' 1896 novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau* are some of the classic tales of extraordinary and violent transformations. Bruce Clarke discusses how Wells' "narrative imagines the deliberate transformation of nonhumans, individual animals of various mammalian species, into humanoid beings" (*Posthuman Metamorphosis,* 2014). In works such as Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* (1953), Linda Nagata's *The Bohr Maker* (1995), Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1993), Philip K. Dick's classic *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), and Octavia E. Butler's *Lilith's Brood* trilogy (formerly known as *Xenogenesis* trilogy) themes of human evolution, technological modifications, post-humanization of humanity, and transformation of the latter upon alien contact, etc. are explored. This study will focus on extreme and more violent aspects of post-human transformation and its impact on the integrity of the self as portrayed in Asher's selected works.

Asher and the world of post-human transformations

Knowledge brings transformations, and transformations demand sacrifice—this seems to be the Asher's Transformation series motto. Taking the cue from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Seven Theses" on monsters, it can be argued that monsters are perfect harbingers of the most transformative and transgressive kind of knowledge since "they bring not just a fuller knowledge" of the humans/post-humans and their place in history but a discourse "from the Outside" ("Monster Culture," 20); interestingly, it is often said that "no one does better with science fiction monsters than Neal Asher" (*Skyhorse Publishing*). It is evident how nonhumans or machinic beings want to become human or mimic humanity to learn to see the world humanely, while humans desire machinic transformations to become invincible. Thus, there are three main ideas that the present study seeks to develop: (1) Asher combines Lovecraftian Horror with techno-horror; (2) the characters undergo extreme bodily transformations in ways that invoke the tropes of post-humanism and sometimes challenge the basic assumption of most posthumanist thoughts, which envisage the body as a site of optimistic transformations. In other words, however weird somatic hybridism may seem to us at first, it will ultimately open us up to broader, more capacious, and more tolerant forms of being without causing degradation, anguish, and mental conflict, which is not the case in Asher's works; (3) the characters struggle to retain their humanity in the face of these transformations. This vision of extreme transformations is purely post-human in spirit as it implies a disassociation with the traditional humanist vision. Sorgner and Ranch have defined post-humanism as "a break with humanism; it is a *post*-humanism" (*Post- and Transhumanism*, 8). Crafting a coherent thesis based on the exploration of these three fundamental ideas is a daunting task, and the study aims to do so by first asking the following question: what does it mean, or why does it matter that Asher combines Lovecraftian intimation about terrible knowledge with techno-horror dysmorphia about transformed bodies? By breaking down the human/nonhuman binary, Asher allows his protagonists to overcome the human inability to comprehend cosmic mystery (a recurrent theme in Lovecraft) and directly see the otherness within the cosmos and within themselves. However, the cost of this discovery is the loss of their humanity.

Moreover, this discovery works both ways: just as humans strive for machine-like knowledge, so do many of Asher's machines for human-like sentiment, and neither humans nor machines are satisfied with what they get. Since it is Asher's illustration of a series of inhuman or post-human transformations that seem to mediate and catalyze the fusion of Lovecraftian Horror with techno-bio monstrosity, a discussion arises about how this emergence of post-human grotesque can help us appreciate the way Asher's works seem to challenge the mainstream view of post-humanism as a mostly positive enhancement of the self. In an interview given to Paul Semel (2018), Asher remarks, "My stuff has been described as space opera, biotech, and post-cyber-punk," and it is with his multi-genre or multilayered space opera that Asher seems to challenge the positivist view of post-humanism proposed by

many preeminent critics. Neal Badmington's words seem to capture this spirit of post-humanism expressed in Asher's works quite succinctly: "All that was solid has melted into air. Posthumanism has finally arrived, and... 'Man' 'himself,' no longer has a place" ("Theorizing Posthumanism," 10). Ranisch and Sorgner also stress the "*post*" in post-humanism, which according to them, is indicative of its complete break with humanism and stands in stark contrast to Transhumanism, which they view as "a type of hyper-humanism" (*Post- and Transhumanism*, 8). Glavanakova describes this differing attitude toward constructing a definition of a post-human entity as follows:

The post-human entity as a fusion between the biological and technological is for some closer to the divine, i.e., moves towards the ascendant end of the vector, but for others in its hybrid, liminal, composite state comes closer to the mutant and monster, a deviation from the normative body representing miscegenation of species. (*Posthuman Transformations*, 2008)

The unique appeal in Asher's works lies in his ability to weld different subgenres of science fiction literature, such as gothic, cyberpunk, and techno-horror, under the overarching narrative framework of far-future space opera. In these novels, Asher's world-building seems to employ various recurrent tropes and examples of transformations of characters who impress us as prototypes rather than being some unrelated characters scattered across the vast Polity universe and beyond.

Various eminent theoreticians have commented on different aspects of post-human transformation. Clarke (2008) speaks about the significance of bodies and environment in narratives that revolve around post-human changes. In Asher's *Transformation* universe and the larger Polity-verse, of which this series is a part, is filled with instances of transformations in response to environmental influences as is most evident in the planet "Spatterjay," which is named after the eponymous virus that infests its every pore and which causes monstrous transformations and sets into motion the lethal and seductive Jain technology that resides in the darkest corners of the galaxy. Pepperell (2003) also comments on the transformative aspect of post-humanism, where machines and bodies converge to give rise to a distinctive form of self-awareness in the transformed beings, which he terms "after humanism"; he goes on to say that "there is no distinction between the mechanical and the organic" (*The Post-human Condition,* 10). Baudrillard comments on the "becoming-machine," and Pramod Nayar opines how the human body should be seen as a "process" that is constantly co-evolving "with technology and other life forms" (*Posthumanism*, 72). The mentally unhinged post-/trans- human scientists who feature in Asher's works often seem to be guided by this vision of co-evolution of man and technology as two indispensable parts of a singular whole. Freire (2014) goes even further by describing the entire "reality as a process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity" (71) in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penny Royal's vision of reality as a malleable construct seems to be guided by this vision. Braidotti also focuses on the transformative aspect of post-humanism in her thesis of "becoming-posthuman" (*Posthuman*, 193). Kass (2001) even mentions how technological progress is not only making us increasingly forgetful of our human nature, but our "humanity have been so transformed by the scientific-technological approach to the world that we are in danger of forgetting what we have to lose, humanly speaking" ("Preventing a Brave New World," 3). In Asher's works, this seems to be a norm rather than an exception since the more each entity gets transformed, the greater are their odds of surviving and thriving in a hostile universe. In the *Transformation* series, we see the swarm AI Brockle get doubly transformed first from a human to a forensic machine and then to a formidable warbot, and in *Rise of the Jain* trilogy, the swarm-machine Clade undergoes a similar transformation. Ansell-Pearson (1997) believes that technological transformation is inevitable, and one may not be able to predict the limits or scope of post-human transformations since there exists no "fixed nature of the human by which one could measure the excesses of technology" (*Viroid Life,* 153). Barad (2018) similarly focuses on the notion of similarity and interchangeability of the human and nonhuman, and a transformation from one to the other should thus be seen as inevitable. According to her, "human" bodies are not inherently different from "nonhuman" ones; what constitutes the "human" (and the "nonhuman") is not "a fixed or pre-given notion" ("Posthumanists Performativity," 234). In a 2010 interview with Peter Gratton, Jane Bennet talks about the necessity of humanizing the nonhuman. She proposes her idea of "a shared inorganics" between humans and nonhumans, which can only be discovered "when we recognize a resemblance between a human body and a nonhuman one" ("Vibrant Matters: An Interview with Jane Bennett").

Transformations of the humans

"But where lay the dividing line between her human and unhuman self?" (Asher, *The Soldier*, 11).

This section aims to show how post-human bio-techno-augmentations can bring various kinds of inconceivable and unknowable "abnormalities" into being through an unholy alliance of body and technology. Amidst the depiction of extreme body horrors unfolding against the post-human background, glimpses of psychological terrors manifesting through such disorders as dissonance, dementia, and disillusionment among the protagonists and fear for the abject, "the Other," the repellent, and the unknown lend Asher's works a Lovecraftian charm. Throughout Asher's works, transformations seem to be playing a subversive role as they restore the "Other" and the alien as the central signifying forces, thereby relegating the human in the background; this paves the way for the emergence of a largely post-/anti-anthropocentric and post-binarist worldview. However, the study attempts to show that the loss of humanity throughout these works is never celebrated, but rather, the works depict the struggles and conflicts within the protagonists to retain the last bits of humanity as the actions of the inhuman, the machinic, and the Other assume center stage. Among the descriptions that portray human protagonists undergoing transformations and suffering the consequences of these, Thorvald Spear's excruciating story of post-human immortality, Isobel Satomi's transformation into a war goddess, and Dr. Whip's biotechnological transformation into a virtually immortal, super-/inhuman scientist are of particular importance.

All about those "horrifically grotesque things"

This section of the analysis highlights how the transformations that the protagonists enact on themselves in Asher's *Transformation Trilogy* and *Lockdown Tales* do not seem to induce any fear or terror in them when considered separately. However, when the characters begin to piece together the different pieces of transformations or augmentations and begin to compare their transformed state with their original one, a horrifying truth dawns upon them. All

four of Asher's works focus on the power and impact of monstrous transformations that emerge from humans' or post-humans' interaction with technology. Asher's works present the picture of corrosive, corruptive, and transgressive shifts occurring due to advanced machinic implants and machinic prostheses, all of which act together to eradicate the boundaries between humans and machines. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen uses the term "category crisis" to refer to the disturbance, destabilization, and dissolution of the known world order that invariably accompanies the rise of the monster since this "refuses easy categorization" (Monster Culture, 1996). The act of transgression and the monster's emergence can also be interpreted as examples where the repressed energy is released and where the "other" and the alienated express themselves in the most subversive ways imaginable. The origins of most of these deadly machines can be traced to the research conducted by the Polity Empire during the prador war and the following years, where it sought further to consolidate its reign over most of the entire galaxy. However, when the machines gained sentience and autonomy, they chose to decommission them as failed or unwanted creations. From this abyss of Polity's rejection and refusal to acknowledge their agency, the machines took a subversive turn.

Asher's Transformation novels and other works illustrate various instances of transformations ranging from viral to technological, where the "Other" or the monster makes its presence felt after each transformation. Following his transformations, the prador named Sverl is thrown into utter uncertainty regarding his newfound identity or lack thereof. He asks himself, "Did I want to be returned to being the vengeful prador I was? Did I want to be fully human?" (Infinity Engine, 2017.) For Sverl too, his transformation seems to pave the way for the horrific and repellent "other" to emerge to the surface while threatening the existence of his original "prador-ness" in the process. As with Isobel, these are the instances of inner transformations that radically alter the inner nature of the beings by unleashing and empowering the hitherto suppressed "other" to take over the original, master self; as will be addressed later, there are also outer forms of transformations where the monstrous "Other" emerges as a result of some grotesque transformations. The otherness of the monster comes under thesis no. 4 of Cohen's classification: "In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond" (Monster Culture, 1996). In the *Transformation Trilogy*, Isobel desired power from Penny Royal, and "the AI had turned her into a powerful monster—a hooder" (War Factory, 2016); it is through these transformations that Penny Royal grants to the humans and aliens alike that the loss of humanity takes place and horrors after horrors unfold. In the case of Isobel, her transmogrification catalyzes the ascend of the grotesque, the machinic, or the abnormal "other" to the forefront while challenging her basic humanness to recede to the background. The words of Baudrillard on "becoming-machine" may be recalled here: "The only solution to the mechanization of man is *Ie devenir-machine:* becoming-machine…total automatism, all trace of the human gone" (Cool Memories, 2005). The present study could have been developed either along post-humanism or Asher's genre treatment. Still, it aims to show how these two aspects are inseparably interrelated here, and the discussion of one invariably necessitates a critical explication of the other.

Doing away with "that mess called Humanity"

As has already been stated earlier, the present work considers the emergence of the post-human as a hybrid, monstrous, and transgressive entity in Asher's selected works. When she is a mere human, Isobel craves more power, and when Penny Royal grants her wishes, she begins to feel as if her human self is no longer able to bear the burden of her monstrous aspect; thus, "what remained of her human part, or even humanity, grew weaker and more difficult to maintain" (Dark Intelligence, 2015). One of the drones even urges Isobel to stop lamenting the loss of "that mess called humanity" since it is merely a dead end and a bundle of contradictions; rather, she should enjoy her newfound post-human status of practically infinite wealth, power, and physical and mental capabilities. These technological advancements, as already stated, have a darker and a more sinister side to them, as it is through these transformations that devolution, degradation, and degeneration also creep in. For Isobel, her battle for reclaiming her steadily fading humanness becomes as intense as her physical battle against the various formidable rivals. When she attacks one of her fellow crime lords from the past, Trent, she is seen trying her best "to retain enough humanity so she wouldn't instantly regard him as prey" and thus resists herself from giving way to the more monstrous impulses. After attaining transformations, humans often become invincible and resemble machines more closely. *Infinity Engine* (2017) presents another story of such a transformation. Penny Royal "blesses" a man named Mr. Pace with the gift of extreme transformation into a virtually immortal and invincible war machine that can divide into separate entities. This narrative foreshadows the transformation of the more monstrous Brockle. In all of Asher's works, various swarm AI entities effortlessly assume any shape they choose, control their modes of becoming through integration or disintegration of different subunits spread across vast distances, and merge with even more advanced technologies. Thus, following Hurley's words, it may be argued that these swarm entities are always "in a continuous state of flux and becoming, almost as if 'giving birth to each other'" (Abject and Grotesque, 2007). Asher describes Mr. Pace as "a man who had gone to Penny Royal intending to make himself indestructible. He had returned with a body made from self-renewing meta-material based on obsidian and diamond shear planes… pretty much blast-proof" (Infinity Engine, 2017). Characters such as Mr. Pace in *Infinity Engine* and the brass man Mr. Crane in the *Agent Cormac* series compel the reader to see them under the light of Jane Bennet's notion of "shared *inorganicism*," where the human and the nonhuman exist in mutual harmony. In Asher's works, boundaries between humans and aliens or humans and machines, which have for so long been considered inviolable and impenetrable, begin to appear as more fluid and permeable than ever. Using Glavanakova's words, it can be stated that Asher's works lead the reader to uncover "the volatile ontological position of the human in the technological age" (*Posthuman Transformations*, 2003). Asher's hybrid and post-human monstrosities are clear examples of Cohen's thesis no. 3, which contains the crisis of category that resists any hierarchies or binaries ("Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 19). In such a post-human age, technology, while able to grant seemingly inconceivable advantages and augmentations of body and mind, also seems to wreak untold havoc on the integrity of being. In Asher's larger Polity universe, it is evident that even such a godlike entity as the Jain Civilization itself is not free from the consequences of various extreme technological transformations. In *The Warship* , Asher describes how incomprehensibly advanced technologies first dehumanized and mechanized the Jain before giving them their present godlike status (The Warship, 2019). Robert Pepperell defines post-humanism as a "general convergence of biology and technology to the point where they are becoming indistinguishable" (*The Posthuman Condition*, iv). At the same time, Alexandra Glavanakova speaks of "future transformation of the human into a new entity and the merging of the human body with the machine" (15) in her book *Posthuman Transformations* (2014). The post-humans in the story thus seem to stretch the idea of "artificially enhanced evolution" (Terranova, "Post-Human Unbounded," 269) to its very extreme. Roboticist Rodney Brooks feels that this form of technology-directed evolution will transform our species from

being the passive product of our natural heritage into "a more Lamarckian sort of species wherein we will be the product of our technology" (*Flesh and Machine*, 232). David Roden, in his "Speculative Post-humanism" theory, also talks about "beings resulting from purely technological activities (e.g., artificial intelligences, synthetic life forms, or uploaded minds)" ("Deconstruction and Excision," 28). However, in Asher's universe, the transformation to the post-human level is a one way and completely irreversible process: "Advancing beyond humanity, the steady evolution of self that comes with living beyond 'the usual' human span comes with its 'harsh' rule: there is no going back" (*The Human*, 2020). The study cites numerous different textual examples—Shell People, Penny Royal, pradors, Thorvald Spear, Isobel Satomi—to show how irrespective of their nature of being (i.e., whether they are originally humans or machines), it is in their struggle to maintain some traces of their original essence in the face of the terrible transformations and consequent suffering of unimaginable mental contradictions that seem to unite them all. Before his death in the human–prador war, the human protagonist, Thorvald Spear, was himself augmented with all forms of cybernetic and bionanotechnological enhancements; thus, he died basically as a post-human only to be resurrected as what Glavanakova terms "experimenter cyborg." The group of experimenter cyborgs "consists of humans that have incorporated machinic parts to enhance their bodily potential" (Cyborg Body Politics, 5). Thorvald Spear is described as one who has been "resurrected from a recording of his mind, a hundred years after the war, he is the only survivor of the eight thousand troops slaughtered by Penny Royal on the planet Panarchia" (War Factory, 2016). He is a post-human according to the definition by Ransch and Sorgner. They maintain that the post-human vision ranges from "the post-human as a new biological species, (to) a cybernetic organism, or even a digital, disembodied entity" (*Post- and Transhumanism*, 8). Thorvald becomes overburdened with an excess of humanity as a result of an amalgamation of multiple selves and is no longer sure of his own identity, while others around him seem to suffer from the loss of humanity. In Asher's novels, the tropes of mind recording and digital resurrection frequently occur throughout different verses and series; this was first introduced in his first *Spatterjay* series novel *The Skinner* (2002). Asher's forte is in his hinting at the undercurrent of intense psychological horror within various forms of digital resurrection or techno-augmentation with which the novels of the *Transformation* series abound. Isobel Satomi is the human protagonist who wants to upgrade herself into something fierce and formidable; thus, Penny Royal transforms her into a "haiman" (human–machine hybrid), whose capabilities do not merely overwhelm her rivals but also her basic humanity. The most extreme "haiman" character in all of Asher's works is probably Orlandine, who features prominently in the *Rise of the Jain* trilogy.

Of Mergers and Connections

Throughout the *Transformation Trilogy*, bionanotechnologies such as nanoscopic connections (War Factory, 2016), cyber-immune nano factories (Dark Intelligence, 2015), self-propagating nano-fibers, nano-nerve interfaces (War Factory, 2016), and various other kinds of "complex enzymes, adaptogens and the whole human toolbox of physical transformation at the microscopic and submicroscopic levels" (War Factory, 2016) continue to transform humanity, and thus, change the very definition of life and death. They also bring to our mind Nayar's definition of post-human transformation "as a process of becoming through new connections and mergers between species, bodies, functions, and technologies" (*Posthumanism*, 30–31). However, these nano-biotechnological implants that later Penny Royal hijacked to enslave and corrupt the augmented transhumans, post-humans, and pradors. Isobel, while being transformed into a war machine, keeps enacting acts of untold violence upon her body, which include tearing her limbs away and replacing them with mechanical ones and eating her flesh, among others: "The limbs themselves she had eaten…she had eaten her own bones" (Dark Intelligence, 2015). Isobel transforms herself into a "hooder"—or the grotesque descendant of some biomechanically augmented war machine. Spear observes how "she changed into a predator—something that could rip the flesh from people's bones". Isobel is transmogrified into an amalgam of gunner and gunman: "Although gun and gunner had been amalgamated, the gunner was still alive". As Glavanakova succinctly comments in her article "Cyborg Body Politics," "the blending of machine and body is usually…monstrous, dangerous, aggressive and fearsome." Noel Carroll categorizes the monstrous forms arising from the inconceivable merger with contradicting categories "such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on" (*The Philosophy of Horror*, 43*)* under "fusion" monsters. Alan Moore's graphic and highly disturbing horror novels such as *Neonomicon* (2010–11) and *Providence* (2015–17) illustrate more examples of a fusion of Lovecraftian monstrosity and gruesome body horror. These kinds of impossibly grotesque mutations, transmogrification, and fusions are an intrinsic and inseparable component of the grotesque world-building of Asher, which then also invariably sets the stage for post-human actors to play their parts. As Wilson Yates remarks, "distortions, exaggeration, a fusion of incompatible parts…confront us as strange and disordered, as a world turned upside down" (*The Grotesque in Art*, 2). This form of extreme transgression can be placed under thesis no. 6 of Cohen's "Seven Theses," which posits the idea of monsters as continually constructing and transgressing boundaries, where the re-construction of a newer one follows the transgression of one boundary. These transformations intensify the body horror element in a post-human setting; however, there also runs an undercurrent of Lovecraftian suggestive horror. While to the audience, the characters' grotesque transformation is quite apparent from the beginning, they realize what they have brought upon themselves only at the end of their transformations, and to make it even more terrifying for them, Penny Royal has granted them a special vision to see and analyze their condition from a third person's perspective. Sometimes, in their desire to attain immortality, the characters desire to be destroyed physically and mentally, and Penny Royal is always more than happy to assist them in their self-imposed degeneration of the body and mind. A businessman named Blite wants to be turned into a simulacrum in the virtual reality world and willingly gives himself up to Penny Royal only "to be sliced into a million pieces and then reassembled, or waited to die" (Dark Intelligence, 2015). The augmented beings in the novels never appear to be finished; rather, they become monsters who are always on the verge of an even more transgressive transformation, and the insane forensic AI Brockle seems to illustrate this brilliantly. This, according to Cohen's categorization of monstrosity, can be labeled as an example of thesis no. 7, by which the monster is never finished and is always full of possibilities of new modes of becoming. In the end, while pursuing Penny Royal, Brockle too seems to enter the event horizon of a black hole and regresses to his pre-machinic self to become human again. Like Penny Royal, Brockle was once also rejected and incarcerated as a dangerous and insane "other" who has no use for the Polity and later returns on the scene as the grotesquely augmented, monstrous "Other" to enact his vengeance. Following Bruce Clarke's line of thinking, one may conclude that Asher's fusion of genres and portrayal of extreme body transmogrifications are also, in fact, stirring examples of "transformations of self-conceptions in response to the metamorphoses of bodies and environments" (*Posthuman Metamorphosis*, 2003). In the story "Dr. Whip" from *Lockdown Tales,* the eponymous doctor seems to have recreated his private hell in the actual world following his transformation into a virtually immortal, post-human scientist "who had taken augmentation to the cyborg limit beyond which flesh fails" (334). Characters such as Dr. Whip seem to challenge what Barad refers to as "a fixed or pre-

given notion" of the idea of humans. Using Braidotti's words, Dr. Whip transforms from a normal human being into a "transversal entity, fully immersed in and immanent to a network of nonhuman (animal, vegetable, viral) relations" (*Posthuman*, 193). Dr. Whip always wanted to be the best and most iconic scientist, and Penny Royal grants him his wish, but it only molds the doctor to a "poisonous and grotesquely artistic end" ("Dr. Whip," 355). Following his extreme transformation, Dr. Whip becomes a mass of endless inner contradictions: "Whip found a mind shattered into pieces at war with each other…He expanded himself and widened the break in his dividing mind as he reached out to every fragment, each one greater than a multitude of human minds" ("Dr. Whip," 353). Borrowing Hayle's words, it may be stated that Dr. Whip seems to have been seduced by post-human "fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality," which to Hayles is the nightmarish aspect of a post-human techno-culture (*How We Became*, 5). The doctor wants to achieve a synergistic unity between the two halves of his mind. Still, all Penny Royal's gifts seem to have done is to unleash his inner demons, and now, these two halves seem to feed off each other like the heads of mythical Cerberus. Following Bundock and Effinger, it may be argued that this type of post-human transfiguration infesting Asher's major characters seems to "place stress on disintegrative negativity, degeneration, anatomization" (*William Blake's Gothic*, 10). Dr. Whip conducts grotesque experiments on one of his subjects, Snyder Clamp, including the "shutdown of life-maintaining nanotechnology so he could suffer numerous STDs, syphilis eating his brain, the deliberate physiological imbalances resulting in obesity… and then deeper still" ("Dr. Whip," 329). Body horror is present at its most gruesome form in this story: "He had tended people being eaten alive by the virus, been sprayed by their blood and other bodily fluids, and even been bitten by one victim as she fought for life, yet he remained uninfected". The figure of Dr. Whip embodies the very essence of post-human monstrosity that is such an important characteristic of Asher's works, and it closely resembles the figure of Sir William Gull, the fictional physician in Alan Moore's graphic body horror novel *From Hell* (1999).

Transformation of the machines

In Asher's universe, it is not just humans who want to transform into godlike beings or invincible war machines that invariably seem to cost them their humanity, but machines themselves seem to transform into human-like entities—or in special cases, such as Penny Royal and Brockle, even into deranged gods. While the extremely violent forensic AI-turned-swarm intelligence Brockle was once constructed from the upload of the human persona, following his transformation into a machine, he ceases to abide by the prescribed rules but rather transforms into a vengeful demigod whose sole purpose is to avenge Penny Royal. Similar, Penny Royal herself, who was once crafted with a stash of different AIs, not with any singular purpose in mind, seems to exceed all design parameters and now threatens to become one wrathful, vengeful God of the Polity universe. However, even with their apparently infinite capabilities for wreaking havoc on everything or everyone around them, they are all primarily driven by the corruption or an imbalance of some purely human emotions. In Brockle's case, it is the desire to do "justice" by any means necessary, while for Penny Royal, it is first an imbalance in its enhanced empathy and later a desire to attain expiation from the sins it committed during the human–prador war that continues to drive their actions. Penny Royal was the first such machine or warship in which the Polity tried to develop the trait of empathy, which transformed it into an insane, paradigm-changing entity.

The slow development of humanity

In an interview given to *Pan Macmillan*, Asher himself admits that his superintelligent and powerful AIs combine "godlike patience with the slow development of humanity" ("5 Questions," *Pan Macmillan*). At the end of the trilogy, it is Riss, the murderous, serpent-like drone and the most inhuman of all creations, that shows the most evident signs of transforming into a human-like entity as it develops compassion for its victims. This is evident in Riss's inability or unwillingness to kill its target Sverl, the grotesquely transformed human–prador amalgam, as a result of which Sverl manages to upload himself into a crystal to be later resurrected. Consequently, Riss finds it hard to stay alive because of the onset of the human qualities of forgiveness and compassion in him for his victims. Drones like Riss have been originally made for one purpose, which is to kill the pradors by injecting them with parasite eggs; however, after the transformation, "she wasn't about to inject a hated enemy with a grotesque and hideous form of death. Riss was heading out to do *good*" (War Factory, 2016). The novel frequently employs such gender-specific pronouns to humanize these much-dreaded machines. There seems to be an undercurrent of thought claiming that Asher wants to show how the demonic, transgressive, and otherized powers can manifest in the form of monstrous feminine "Others" against the patriarchal hegemonic rule of the Polity Empire, which demonizes and discards its machinic entities that do not conform to its expectations. The renegade machines that show signs of rebellion against the established and oppressive order of Polity and later undergo dementia and breakdowns were initially associated by the Polity with the "sub-human, barbarous, archaic, irrational and demonic 'other'" (Hanegraaff, "Fiction in the Desert," 100).

The Lovecraftian element in situations where machines or pradors reverse-transform into the human-like "other" is recognizing their irreversible change. In the uncompromisingly predatorial world of machines, attaining the tenderness of humanity makes these machines much more vulnerable to the attacks of other more advanced machines. Moreover, when humanoids such as the cyborg Golems realize that no matter how closely they imitate the actual humans, majority of the humans would never accept them as their own, they undergo mental derangement and proceed to perpetrate unthinkable violence on themselves and other around them. This further illustrates Glavanakova's "volatile ontological position" of not only humans but also invulnerable machines, whom such posthuman transformations continue to affect in more than one way. Riss is described as suffering from her inner "feeling of dissatisfaction" (War Factory, 2016) and a sense of purposelessness in her life; she feels an inexplicable pang of "that *other* emptiness" (War Factory, 2016) rising within her, which in this case can be identified as the human feelings of remorse and repentance. Riss becomes extremely aware of this inexplicable and unwanted psychological development: "Riss knew that she was feeling, and had felt for a long time, something akin to human depression… when nothing satisfied, nothing gave pleasure, and everything looked bleak". For so long, Riss would have formatted her hard drive and erased any such momentary rise of weak, human-like feelings, but now, she is no longer sure that it would help her; rather, she seeks to emulate humans in dealing with this unexpected surge of extremely depressive behavior.

Machines transmuting into Lovecraftian "Other"

In the other timeline of the past and in the post-Polity future, where most of the stories in *Lockdown Tales* take place, it is not only by undergoing the most extreme and unimaginable kind of transformations that machine minds can hope to rival or even exceed human intelligence but there was a time when the AIs and cyborgs (called Golems) attained something most akin to pure humanity even by choosing to remain unaugmented. In the story titled "The Relict" from *Lockdown Tales*, the human protagonist, Rune, describes the phase of post-human transformation that took place before the interstellar human–prador war, where post-human entities, sentient machines, and AIs all "retreated into virtual worlds written into the cores of neutron stars" (61) and consequently became more humans than the (post-)humans themselves. In this context, one may recall Baudrillard's statement on how the machines could become less machines and more human-like by disappearing into "The dream of the virtual era…" (Cool Memories, 2005). The same story recalls how the descendants of the AIs and post-humans managed to hold onto their humanity despite the prospect of an all-out human–alien war looming: "It has always been accepted that the AIs were post-humans. The individuals that came next, whether arising from AI or human, could be described as post-post-humans, but humans nevertheless" ("The Relict" in *Lockdown Tales*, 61). The Golems, who are described as obedient human–machine hybrids, aspire more to humanity than to the attainment of invincible, machine-like traits. The human-like Golems are described as "a sad combination of human facsimile and the truth of exposed and broken machine" (208). As time passes, and the Golem cyborg recuperates from the damage she has suffered, she is described as showing clear signs of humanness: "Her human emulation being near perfect, he found a response stirring in a body that had long been numb to such". The Golems were intended to be built as obedient machines who would emulate humans in virtually all respects without ever desiring to exceed or excel them in any given parameter; this too did not go as intended, and the Golem humanoids developed humanity in them before the start of the great war. The same story illustrates that the Golems "were made to emulate human beings and had the same sensations in their skin and elsewhere and could, like with so much about them, even feel more". Golems have been described as follows:

Unique and independent entities. They were not less than human beings, and very often, they were more. They experienced similar emotions, needs, and wants to humans and, in some cases, could experience and feel things humans could not, without augmentation, feel.

However, when humans refuse to acknowledge these machines as being on par with themselves and discard them in the quest for building more inhuman machines, these machines seem to descend into insanity and seek ways of exacting revenge against the humans. Even innocuous machines, when they adopt Jain technology or become infected with Spatterjay Virus, seem to transform into terrific and often Lovecraftian monsters. With the introduction of such Lovecraftian monstrous machines as Penny Royal and Brockle, the gap between humanity and machines seems to widen. Our views regarding the impossible and inscrutable AI monstrosities that emerge in Asher's universe seem to resonate with Brid-Aine Parnell, according to whom Asher's works show how "future biological and technical changes will take humans from their humanity and the impossibility of knowing a hugely superior mind like an AI" ("Hardboiled"). Penny Royal goes beyond any traditional classification of characters into either hero or villain; rather, with its warped morality and inscrutable sense of justice, it influences the outcome of events on a universal scale: "Penny Royal is perhaps an extreme version of the antihero, with its particular morality, and a unique approach to its treatment of others and to how the universe should function" ("Dr. Whip," 312); it is "the absolute quintessence of sharp lethality. A demon utterly without relation to the human form" (Dark Intelligence, 2015). For such a powerful entity as Penny Royal, the entire galaxy is but "a massive universal chessboard" where human, prador, and post-human protagonists of the story such as Sverl, Spear, Isobel, Cvorn, and even super-advanced Polity AIs are mere pawns. Nobody has even the slightest idea what "the ultimate checkmate" would be (War Factory, 2016). Throughout the entire *Transformation* series, in the end, everything seems to be always predetermined by Penny Royals' manipulations from behind the scenes, no matter what unfolds. Penny Royal is not only playing the game of chess passively but is also an active player, manipulating the outcome of events through various means that involve even going back in time to alter them: "Penny Royal's dark and depraved form of lunacy seems to be threatening the very existence of the universe. Penny Royal had taken them back in time—the kind of action that had always been equated with dangerous, universe-destroying lunacy" (War Factory, 2016). Penny Royal is described as a "paradigm changer" (Infinity Engine, 2017; War Factory, 2016), and as an insane God playing tricks on the hapless humans, post-humans, and the entire universe as well. Science fiction critic Paul Di Filippo has observed that Asher's works portray "a scenario that trembles on the edge of the Singularity while still being comprehensible to, and inhabitable by, the humans of the era" (*"Paul Di Filippo Reviews Neal Asher"*). Penny Royal seems to have transcended her very state of being to become a pure and unified metaphysical entity, s"… passing beyond our known universe into something grand and numinous" (Infinity Engine, 2017). Borrowing Otto's words of the numinous, it can be argued that in its mysterious and majestic final form, Penny Royal's existence becomes "incommensurable" with anything that has existed before it and that it becomes the "wholly other" and an "alien to us, uncomprehended and unexplained" (*The Idea of the Holy*, 40). Penny Royal impresses readers as one of the perfect post-human, post singular reimagining of the classic Lovecraftian cosmic monsters such as Azathoth, Cthulhu, Nyarlathotep, and Yog-Sothoth, collectively also known as the Great Old Ones. Commenting on the "cosmic horror" in literature, Lovecraft emphatically states, "It has always existed, and always will exist" (*Omnibus 2*, 425). To Penny Royal, the transformations she enacts are but jokes, and, in this respect, the AI appears as an indifferent and insane God who does what it pleases. Penny Royal is deemed to possess "godlike powers" (Infinity Engine, 2017) and "godlike abilities" (War Factory, 2016), and with its "insane godlike intelligence" (Dark Intelligence, 2015), it engages in "godlike manipulation of events" (War Factory, 2016). Both humans and pradors ask for upgrades from their Techno God AI Penny Royal. In the name of granting enormous mental and physical powers, the capricious and indifferent AI Penny Royal seems to play some "obscure," (*Infinite Engine, 2017*), "horrifying," (War Factory, 2016), and "grotesque, physical jokes" (*Infinity Engine,* 2017; Dark Intelligence, 2015) on the humans as well as the pradors; in this way, Penny Royal gradually expands herself to the level of the unknown Lovecraftian monster. However, even the invincible, godlike dark AI Penny Royal is shown to be riddled with psychological horrors. Despite its invincible machinic features, it impresses the reader as an entity possessing the mind of a conflicted and insane individual. From the moment of her birth and naming, she has been a startling amalgamation of contradictions, confusions, and conflict: "Penny Royal's mind is a mass of contradictions" (*Infinity Engine*, 61). Her name refers to an herb that humans used to take to cause abortion, and it is her frantic search to abort the darker aspect of herself that had once led her to christen herself with this peculiar name. Penny Royal's case is an example of a more radical and monstrous outer form of transformation where the Lovecraftian "Other" threatens to dismantle the primary agent in the discursive framework by unleashing chaos, conflict, and confusion and doing away with all kinds of rules and regulations. Penny Royal was cast aside

once as a reject, an unwanted one, only to return as the monstrous "Other"; her very name symbolizes her desperate attempt to find some sort of positive and life-affirming vitality within herself and around her, which is not much different from that of a human:

It must somehow negate the growing darkness within. A frantic search keys into stored history about abortion. But it cannot just be all about being rid of its unwanted other. It should also be about something positive, something life-affirming. (War Factory, 2016).

Inconceivably powerful entities such as Penny Royal seem to instill in the reader what Berruti (2004) describes as a "sense of cosmic Outsidedness" (376) that eludes the grasp of simple human reasoning and logic to remain forever indecipherable. However, they have advanced minds that not just elicit comparison with but easily exceed and transcend the capacities of any human, haiman, or post-human machine mind. Just as Penny Royal, Brockle's mind too can contemplate the infinite and the infinitesimal fundamentals of time and space and the proliferating continuum of extra dimensions and hyperspace in all their minute details; moreover, it can hover around and return from the kind of mental event horizon from which very few post-human entities could ever dream of returning. Russel Letson uses the term "narrative event horizon" to describe Penny Royal's complex and metaphysical nature. Even though utterly transformed, Brockle continues to act like a human being on a mission to set this right. Ironically, however, Brockle does not know how warped his own sense of justice and retribution is and how different it is from that of humans. Using Lovecraft's words, Penny Royal or Brockle can be described as the "frightful messenger(s) from unformed realms of infinity beyond all Nature as we know it; from realms whose mere existence stuns the brain and numbs us with the black extra-cosmic gulfs it throws open before our frenzied eyes" ("The Colour Out of Space," from *Hplovecraft.com*).

Conclusion

Lovecraft writes, "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents" (*The Call of Cthulhu*, 1). In Asher's universe, as a result of massive but monstrous transformations, the protagonists gain the ability to "correlate all the contents" of the universe quite masterfully with the help of their enormously expanded physiological and psychological skills but only at the cost of humanity or their integrity of being. This study illustrated how Asher harnesses the transformative power of post-human monstrosity and biotechnological grotesquery in his works, which question the limits of transformation before the very notion of human breaks down. For this study, the author has shown how Asher welds together the Lovecraftian mode of horror and bio-techno-horror to create a setting where the struggle to retain the last remaining features of humanness informs the works with a unique appeal in his already sprawling and expansive Polity universe. His uniqueness lies in how he conceives bodily transformations as violent events that deprive the subjects of their humanity, unlike other sci-fi writers who are optimistic—or at least neutral—about bodily transformations. Asher takes this stance because he is committed to sci-fi horror, especially the Lovecraftian sort, and has a pessimistic take on post-humanism.

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